



Nigeria

Faith-Based Initiative Proves to be Successful

The Church of Christ in Nigeria has educated community members on civic responsibilities and women's rights for many years. But recently, it has also taken a more proactive role in HIV/AIDS prevention and care of people living with HIV/AIDS due to CEDPA's intervention.

Overview

Founded in 1904 and officially registered in 1975, the Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN) has about 3,000 congregations spread throughout the 26 Nigerian states. It has an estimated three to four million members, giving it a strong grassroots reach in many parts of Nigeria. The COCIN framework includes a Women's Fellowship, which has about 500,000 active members. Each congregation also has Boys' and Girls' Brigades for children aged six to 12 years and a Youth Brigade for adolescents aged 12 to 19 years. COCIN has a health system that includes two hospitals and 150 clinics.



In 1998, the COCIN Women's Fellowship began working with CEDPA on democracy and governance (DG) programs. A year later, the women persuaded church leaders to add a reproductive health (RH) project in Plateau State in north-central Nigeria.

Democracy and Governance Activities

During 1998-2002, the Women's Fellowship implemented various DG activities, including civic education programs, capacity building, and the formation of "accountability" and "democracy" watch groups. These activities promoted transparency, accountability, and democratic ideals among church leaders and elected officials.

The program also educated the public on women's rights and promoted the participation of women in politics. COCIN mobilized women to register to vote and to run in elections for their Local Government Council



"CEDPA is helping the Church to do what God expects, so COCIN will sustain the activities...especially the HIV/AIDS activities." - Rev. Alexander Lar, COCIN President (center) at an advocacy meeting with members of a sister church, Nongo Kristu U Sudan Ken Tiv, to encourage networking and partnerships between faith-based organizations in the promotion of RH.

(LGC). Voter turnout in targeted areas reached record levels. Two women won party primaries to contest the chair of Jos South and Ryom Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the 1999 elections. A member of the Women's Fellowship, Rachel Adanci, became the Chairperson of Bokokos LGC.

The DG project also changed the thinking of church leaders, who had previously made no distinction between church-inspired morality and science. They began to see that they had a responsibility to warn their members of the dangers of HIV/AIDS. This insight led to the introduction of a RH project.

Reproductive Health Activities

During 1999-2002, COCIN added family planning (FP) services to its hospitals and clinics in Plateau State. CEDPA trained midwives in life-saving skills to improve their management of obstetrical complications. In six

LGAs, COCIN linked communities to the clinics by recruiting and training community-based distributors (CBDs), traditional birth attendants, male counselors, and peer health educators. These volunteers educate community members on RH, distribute contraceptives, and make referrals for clinical services. Trained community-based advocates encourage community members to participate in civil society and take joint action to improve women's health and family well-being.



"I used to think that people with HIV/AIDS are sinners who deserved their fate. But after the workshop I came to understand that anybody can have it. As follow-up, I organized workshops for youth." - Rev. Dauda Davou, Regional Church Council, Jos

A major factor in galvanizing church leaders and members to recognize the threat of HIV/AIDS and to reduce the stigma against people living with HIV/AIDS was the group's interaction with a Ugandan minister. COCIN leaders visited the Rev. Gideon Byamugisha, who is living with HIV/AIDS. He subsequently visited Nigeria and spoke to 600 COCIN ministers and their wives, leaders from other Christian denominations, and the general public. His visit attracted prominent media

coverage and led to a change in COCIN's stance toward HIV/AIDS and the use of contraceptives by its members.

- As a result of sensitization and advocacy activities around HIV/AIDS, the Church has made a dramatic shift in its stance on HIV/AIDS and condom use. Clergymen are now free to talk about AIDS from the pulpit and condom use is encouraged among married couples.
- COCIN has added new health services, such as counseling and voluntary testing of couples intending to marry, and it has increased the number of patients being screened for HIV/AIDS. It has established a health unit to train church leaders, members, and health workers in sexually-transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS.
- COCIN has provided RH information to some 809,000 people through group talks, home visits, advocacy activities, and behavior change communication materials. Male counselors have involved more men in RH services and peer health educators have educated youth on RH.
- During 2000-2002, the COCIN clinics and CBD workers served 11,222 FP clients, providing condoms, pills, injectables, and inter-uterine devices, generating more than 1,500 couple years of protection. The actual number of contraceptive users is estimated to be higher, since many COCIN members visit government clinics and private providers.
- COCIN leaders have since reached out to other churches to encourage them to offer RH services as well as HIV/AIDS prevention and support.

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